

Paraguay to the Polls

It's a Dictatorship, but Few Seem To Care Enough to Stay and Fight

ASUNCION, PARAGUAY.

Gen. Alfredo Stroessner is often called "the last dictator in South America." Since 1945 he has ruled little Paraguay under an official state of siege, which he extends every 90 days with a regularity that is, for all practical purposes, automatic. Though there is mounting speculation about when Stroessner will go the way of Peron, Batista, Trujillo, Vargas, and other Latin American *caudillos*, there have been no serious attempts to unseat him.

Most United States opinion is firmly opposed to the dictator. But here in Paraguay, the issues are not so clear-cut, and the United States concept of democracy may be, slightly premature, for this country. Getting rid of a dictator is one thing, and replacing him is quite another. The question of Stroessner has to be taken in the context of alternatives, and for Paraguay "What next?" may not be much better than "What now?"

Paraguay will conduct an "election" on Feb. 10, but no one here is paying much attention to it. The summer heat is so oppressive that even to write seems hardly worth the effort. The pen moves slowly, and perspiration drips on the notebook even in the shade.

Because of the boiling heat, the only safe place to see Asuncion is from the inside of a dark, open-front car. Outside in the main plaza—across the street from the Bar Independencia—half-breed Indians sprawl lazily on benches, and from somewhere across town comes the clang of an ancient trolley. Soon the coach heaves into view, rattling slowly along its rails on Calle Palma, a red relic that looks like something out of Baltimore in the 1920s.

Smell of Fish on the Breeze

The trolley is the only thing moving. Now and then an Indian shifts on a bench to adjust the newspaper covering his face. A 10-year-old boy pads barefoot into the bar selling contraband American cigarettes. A warm breeze drifts in from the Paraguay River, bringing a smell of fish, and rustling the leaves on red-blossomed trees in the plaza.

Asuncion is an O. Henry kind of place. Though it's the nation's capital, it seems more like some upriver Amazon town in Brazil. It is about as lively as Atlantis, and nearly as isolated. There is poverty, but little squalor, and portraits of *El Presidente* dot the downtown walls: "Justice and Work for All, with Alfredo Stroessner."

The president already is campaigning for a third term. He doesn't need to, but he is doing it anyway, because he insists he is not a dictator and he can't

understand why North American papers keep saying he is. Stroessner broods over this; somebody up there is trying to queer his image, he thinks, and it makes him bitter.

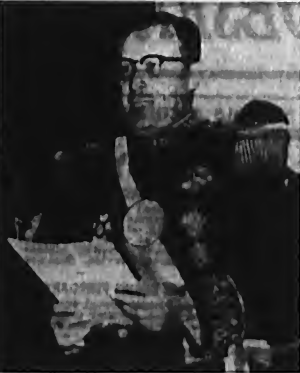
He has other suspicions, too. Last year, he says, he was promised nearly \$2,000,000 under the Alliance for Progress, but he has not yet received the money. The pro-Stroessner newspapers in Asuncion say the Kennedy Administration is trying to put the pressure on *El Presidente*. "We backed the United States on Cuba," they say, "but Paraguay still hasn't received a single dollar under the Alliance."

One United States official on the other hand, says that "the United States would like to see a broadening of political participation in this country."

Election Means Little

The coming election, though, will not change anything. *El Presidente* is sure to win easily, although he is allowing token opposition from a group of people called The Revolutionary Directorate, which is a bit of a misnomer. His only real opposition isn't allowed to wage a campaign. Even so, most observers say Stroessner should win without difficulty, even in a free election. The only reason he doesn't hold one, they say, is that he doesn't want "exile elements" coming back to "stir up trouble."

The question of "exiles" is no small matter. The national population is reckoned at roughly 1,760,000, and some 500,000 of these live, for various reasons, outside the country. Another 210,000 live



Gen. Alfredo Stroessner.



Hunter S. Thompson

Rattling along its rails, a trolley was practically all that was stirring in Asuncion, Paraguay's capital, "an O. Henry kind of place."

in Asuncion, and the rest are spread out in small towns and farming villages.

Obviously, any country with a third of its population living outside the borders would appear to have a few problems—and Paraguay does, but Stroessner is only one of them. Though both Buenos Aires and Montevideo have large colonies of middle-class Paraguayans plotting against the dictator, many informed people wonder what these "exiles" would do if the dictator fell.

The Trouble With Rebellion

Observers are nearly unanimous that a successful rebellion against Stroessner would result in a chaotic scramble for power from which nothing but trouble would emerge. "You have to realize," says one American, "that political philosophy is not a major factor in politics here—the main things are leaders, personalities, and power."

Stroessner has never gone in heavily for philosophy. With the army on his side, he doesn't need it. Nor does it make much sense for him to claim he isn't a dictator. He is, but not even in the same league with people like Batista and Trujillo. "What you have here," says one diplomat, "is an old-fashioned strongman government that fairly well characterizes Paraguay's stage of social and economic development."

"It's an agricultural-pastoral society, with no real organized labor or urban masses, and its institutions have not

been subjected to those pressures that cause change. You'll get political change here when social and economic development comes along to force that change."

This leads inevitably to a "chicken or egg" sort of argument. It might be said, for instance, that Stroessner's methods retard any change—social, political, or otherwise—that is likely to make him uncomfortable in the presidential palace. He doesn't look kindly on people who agitate for change, and one result is that the average "social and economic development" of Paraguayans "exiles" is much higher than the average of those who have stayed behind.

The Big City Lure

Yet there is another consideration: Asuncion itself—boiling hot, painfully dull, twice as expensive as Rio de Janeiro. Asuncion is as different from Buenos Aires as Bowling Green, Ky., is from Chicago. It would not take a dictator to drive a man out of this town, and most of Paraguay's "exiles" did not need a dictator to make them leave. A big majority are students, young people, and professional men, and they go to the cities for the same reason young people have always gone since cities were invented. There is almost no opportunity in Paraguay, outside of inheriting a cattle ranch.

So Stroessner wins almost by default. The people with the means and wits to oppose him find life more attractive elsewhere, and those who stay are not the types to dedicate themselves to a long, hard struggle for democracy.

Youthful Secret Societies

Not all Paraguayans are quite so docile. Stroessner's opponents still hold secret meetings to plot against "the tyrant," and they are quite sincere. But they are also young, and they know all about the big world beyond the borders. At a recent meeting in the town of Villarico, 95 per cent of those present were under 25, and at least 80 per cent were under 20. Some had friends and relatives in Buenos Aires. When it comes time to choose between staying home to fight "the tyrant" or moving on, they may well move on.

In many ways, Paraguay is getting along pretty well. Stroessner is pushing his own little Alliance for Progress, and in such matters as land reform, currency stabilization, rural schools, and road building he is steadily getting things done. His recent concern over his "image" has caused him to act more like a leader and less like a warden. During the past year, his popularity has risen considerably.

The situation is one of the least menacing in South America. The people who live here are relatively happy, there are no mobs in the streets or Communists hurling bombs, inflation has been checked, fiscal problems have been brought under control, and in most parts of the country there is evidence of progress on very basic levels. The only thing missing, of course, is democracy.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON

THE OBSERVER
SCRAPBOOK

Ancient Wisdom

To know people is to be wise.
To know oneself is to be illumined.
To conquer others is to have strength.
To conquer oneself is to have power.
To be content is to have great wealth.
Devotedly to follow the Way is to fulfill all aims.
He who stays where he is enduring.
To die and not to be lost—this is called "long life."
—From the ancient Chinese book, *Tao Teh Ching*, the classic of the Way of Virtue (c. 600 B.C.)

This Week in History

On Jan. 28, 1706, in England, John Baskerville, the type designer, was born.

John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* was presented for the first time in London Jan. 29, 1728.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States, was born at Hyde Park, N.Y., Jan. 30, 1882. On the same date in

Doublets: A Puzzle

Lewis Carroll (pseudonym for Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) introduced a word game called "Doublets" in the magazine *Vanity Fair* in 1879. Modern readers may wish to test themselves at the same game.

Rules: Two words are proposed, of the same length; the puzzle consists in linking these two words

